**The Baltimore Ravens Save Comparative Historical Sociology:**

**A Conspiracy Theory about Mayrl and Wilson’s *After Positivism***

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While reading this excellent book, I struggled to gain some leverage on the editors, and failing that, I attempted to pick on the individual contributors. Try as I might to do my best impression of a Marxist at a Laclau and Mouffe job talk, I could not catch them on anything at all. But then it hit me: surely there is something suspicious about a book so viciously efficient. It was at that point that I decided to use an analogy with which all professional academics can relate: American Football.

The Baltimore Ravens field the best defense in the National Football League. Their calling card is the element of surprise: one does not know what they will do at any given moment. Sports analysts have called their defense “shapeshifting” and note that the Ravens vary their coverages week to week depending on the opponent. They have no consistent approach, so other teams are unable to prepare. The Ravens defense is so successful in fact that football fans now speak of a “Ravens Tree,” for Baltimore’s defensive coordinators can now be found in Los Angeles, Seattle, and until recently New York. The Ravens have even infiltrated college football: last year the Michigan Wolverines won the national championship with a Ravens-style defense.

Nicholas Hoover Wilson and Damon Mayrl (hereafter Nick and Damon) are the Baltimore Ravens defense of comparative historical sociology. After watching a Ravens game, the educated football fan is satisfied and intellectually stimulated. The Ravens are playing chess, while everyone else is playing checkers. Similarly, Nick and Damon have published an edited volume that is as impactful for our time as the comparative historical literature of the 1980s and 90s and Adams, Clemens and Orloff’s *Remaking Modernity*. Like the debates over eventful sociology, causal inference, and waves, Nick and Damon have furnished a guide for a new generation of sociologists, born in this century, who are hungry for a guide to a subfield that is metatheoretically unsettled.

How are Nick and Damon able to do so well? For clues, we return to their doppelgangers, the Baltimore Ravens.

First, the Ravens always take something away. In most cases, it is impossible to take away all of the opponent’s offensive weapons. Most teams can run and throw the ball in a variety of different schemes, but the point of the Ravens defense is to take away the opponent’s deadliest weapon: it might be the deep pass, an explosive runner, or an annoying quarterback with ice water in his veins.

Mayrl and Wilson take away not one but two interrelated critiques of comparative historical methods. To begin, they acknowledge that Haraway, Du Bois, and Smith, among others have argued that all knowledge is “unavoidably partial and perspectival” and reflect “differences in social power.” However, this epistemological critique is not the only game in town, for others like Andrew Abbott have challenged comparative historical positivism on ontological grounds. Against positivism’s assumption of a social world that is “essentially homogeneous” and “stable,” these analysts characterize the social world as “heterogeneous” and “dappled.” Then on page 5, in a stroke of Ravenesque suppleness, Nick and Damon write, “although we do not intend to ignore or minimize the epistemological critique of positivism, this volume instead centers the ontological critique.”

Having thus walled off the epistemological critique from the ontological, they turn to the former’s partners in crime: standpoint and reflexivity, which attack linear reality in its own way: by questioning positivism’s “sharp division between fact and values” and insisting on “the need to account for the researcher’s position in the knowledge production process.” Those in this camp are a familiar cast of characters. They include the Du Boisians Itzigsohn and Brown, the postcolonial theorist Julian Go, and the feminist Donna Haraway. After acknowledging their service in the war against positivism, however, the editors dispense with them. They write, “However strong their emphases, these works collectively attempt to either reconstruct or transcend the positivist goals of comparison. And although in our view all these lines of thought have been valuable, this volume goes in another direction” (p.10). “The task of a volume such as this is less to prescribe or derive a logical set of ‘best practices,’” they continue, “but rather to describe and develop a vocabulary that is sufficiently capacious to enable … the excellent work already going on” (p. 11).

The Baltimore Ravens are successful for a second reason: they are masters of disguise. In one of their favorite tactics, they act as if they are about to rush the opposing side with maximum personnel (a tactic called the blitz that makes the quarterback throw the ball quickly) but then drop back suddenly to intercept the pass.

Likewise, Nick and Damon deftly present as postpositivist anarchists. In a stunning sentence on p. 11 of their introduction, they write, “we take to heart the spirit (if not the anarchist letter) of Paul Feyerabend’s exhortation ‘anything goes!’ and seek to employ whatever elements of postpositivism produce interesting new substantive results and insights.”

But this, I maintain is a clever disguise. If the Ravens show blitz, but drop back into soft coverage to intercept the pass, then Nick and Damon show Feyerabend, but are really Imre Lakatos. Lakatos emerged as an alternative to both Popper and Kuhn in mid-twentieth century philosophy of science. On the one hand Popper argued that a given theory should be abandoned as soon as evidence emerges to challenge it, while on the other Kuhn held that in periods of normal scientific activity, research programs endure unchallenged despite anomalies. Lakatos thought this was nonsense. In fact, he argued, research programs develop in such a way that scientists absorb challenges to the foundational assumptions of a theory by formulating auxiliary hypotheses that form a protective ring around the hard core of the research program. By walling off contemporary comparative historical methods from standpoint theory and epistemological critique, and absorbing some forms of ontological critique, Nick and Damon build a protective ring around the hard core of the research program that is social science history. Poor Phil Gorski comes off as defensive in his afterword, when he writes against Feyerabend that “Many things” – not anything – “go.” But it is Nick and Damon who are mounting the spirited defense.

As in life, repression leads inexorably to a situation in which possible alternatives leak through. Psychoanalysts use a variety of concepts for such leakage: projection, the Freudian slip, and so on. There is leakage throughout this volume, as the editors work mightily to keep the epistemological and positional challenges at bay.

Indeed, every contributor is defensively aware of these challenges. For example, on pages 189-190, Steinmetz concedes that “social standpoints may provide opportunities for knowledge.” On page 296, Emigh et al write, “positionality influences knowledge, and the contestation among knowledge holders in different social positions is also crucial in developing new knowledge…Positionality is inherent in the research process as well as social life” (p. 297). Zhang’s essay on temporality speaks of the “reflexivity of relational agency” on pages 270-271. Even Damon’s injunction to immersion into the case gestures toward reflexivity and standpoint. When he writes of the “intimacy of analysis” on p. 60, I could not help but wonder whether immersion might include the embodiment and standpoint of the analyst and social actors.

If I have any critique of Nick and Damon’s book, it is my worry about what we sacrifice in trying too hard to sideline subaltern, reflexive, and positional critiques of positivism. Psychoanalytically, might we be repressing a part of who we are as a community: not just our identities and yes, bias, but also our experience of, and complicity in, violence and injustice? In this, I resonate with Marco’s indictment of invidious comparison which does personal and political harm, and Ann’s retrogression to the personal about the importance of politics in her work with Theda and the macho vibe in the philosophy of social science.

Gorski’s afterword is especially poignant in this regard. Part of his critique is that the ethical commitments of critical realism and comparative historical sociology have gone by the wayside. While not a defense of positional or epistemological critique per se, Phil leads me to an existential question. Nick and Damon have done a masterful job of building a Ravenesque palisade around the hard core of postpositivist social science history and furnishing an excellent map through this tricky terrain. But I join Phil in asking, “what’s it all for if not for a just society?”